

Sookhoo D. Ethics of Estate Regeneration. *Royal Institute of British Architects Journal* 2016.

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Link to article:

<https://www.ribaj.com/intelligence/ethics-of-estate-regeneration>

Date deposited:

16/06/2017

Ethics of Estate Regeneration

Getting to grips with the ethics of estate regeneration is as pressing as the practical means of achieving it.

Keywords: Regeneration, rebuild, housing, practice, where people live, internal management, community involvement.



Mae's Hillington Square in King's Lynn. © Mae LLP, 2016.

The ethical dilemma for architects engaged in estate regeneration is the need to balance the rights of existing residents, who have invested socially and financially in their neighbourhoods, with the unvoiced claims of potential new neighbours desperate for a home.

Estate regeneration can be a controversial, complex, bruising business. Architects engaged in it have recently found themselves accused by activists and the media of being complicit in social cleansing, heritage heresy, crimes against sustainability and profiteering. Residents' ongoing negative experiences of estates resulting from poor construction, maintenance failures or perceived systematic underinvestment may provide a dismal basis for forecasting the new project team's intent or ability to create socially equitable, liveable neighbourhoods.

Architects anxious about slotting into a past narrative of social decline may choose to avoid regeneration projects altogether. However, the incoming architect's decision to accept a regeneration commission should be based on how likely they feel able to positively influence what happens next. Wrestling socially responsible, architecturally worthy projects from years of decline or underinvestment requires our most capable, morally grounded architects. Withdrawing for fear of unjust disapproval or project complexities is an abdication of responsibility for a widely regarded societal challenge: providing more, high quality homes where they are needed most.

Consider all options

Being passive is not an option. Architects may be reluctant to exceed their brief, but remaining ethically active throughout the regeneration process means embracing a strategic role within the project team. According to Claire Bennie, 'Architects are often brought into the regeneration process when the client mindset appears unshakeable. But architects have a vital role in informing the context for decision-making and ensuring all options are considered.'

Using the design process as a vehicle to frame, model and test decision-making and assumptions should encourage enlightened clients to be more self-critical about their objectives and how best to achieve them while addressing competing moral claims. Acting ethically is a practical business. For example, it is perfectly reasonable for architects undertaking an initial phasing study to ask how residents will be temporarily housed during regeneration to ensure their work minimises social disruption. It is also sensible to ask about long-term maintenance funding to explore whether design intent can be sustained.

Being analytical provides clients with the added value expected of an architect by flushing out overlooked practical problems. It may also allay your fears about potential hidden agendas.

Unfounded criticism can overshadow regeneration projects, sapping morale within architecture practices, making clients risk averse and potentially inhibiting a full exploration of all options necessary to discover the best possible solution for residents. Promoting a reflective approach to design decision-making within practice, including openly evaluating the veracity of criticism against evidence built through design, may prove a powerful tonic. If, having examined the evidence, you find external criticism justified or your client closed to other, deliverable options, it may be worth considering your involvement.

Demolition debate

Architects' self-awareness about their own predispositions is required to honestly challenge pro-demolition and anti-demolition dogma and to make evidence-based recommendations to clients and residents on a case by case basis. It is not inherently unethical to weigh up the long-term benefits to existing and future residents against losing what is perceived by the architectural community as a valuable building, and recommend demolition. Nevertheless architects are reluctant to participate in projects requiring the demolition of buildings that represent historical social progress, receive international acclaim or that have been personally instructive. But where demolition and rebuild allows for a purpose-built project able to benefit existing residents, provide new homes and make better use of resources in the long term, failing to at least consider demolition is potentially short-sighted. Indeed, preserving a building solely for its architectural pedigree or its value to the architecture profession's past self-concept could be construed as self-serving and stifling our ability to realise socially responsible public projects in the present.

Architects should, however, beware of demolition as a politically expedient, potentially inappropriate means of dealing with so-called sink estates. A growing body of work demonstrates that where finance permits and building fabric is sound, architects can effectively address social stigma and poor energy performance without unnecessary social disruption or loss of heritage. Collective Architecture's fabric first high-rise refurbishment of Cedar Street, Glasgow is targeting Passivehaus EnerPHit and questioning the tendency to demolish within the city. Ryder's Bolam Coyne refurbishment brought part of Erkin's listed Byker Wall, Newcastle back from dereliction to provide new homes and stem urban decay.



Image 1/6: Mae's Hillingdon Square: a major reworking with additions. © Mae LLP, 2016.



Image 2/6: It can become something that residents are excited about, without losing their community networks. © Mae LLP, 2016.



Image 3/6: Liveable space in place of garages. © Mae LLP, 2016.



Image 4/6: The existing buildings with a rather bleaker garage outlook to the street. © Mae LLP, 2016.



Image 5/6: Long deck access as visible here has also been addressed in Mae's work. © Mae LLP, 2016.



Image 6/6: Model of slab blocks of Hillington Square. © Mae LLP, 2016.

Mae's Hillington Square, King's Lynn, provides a model of how to replan and retrofit a seemingly unlovely, ubiquitous slab block estate: replacing rows of garage doors with extended living space to create an active street, shortening endless deck access to provide residents with places to linger, and redefining the public realm to reconnect the estate to the historic neighbourhoods beyond.

If a new client is unwilling to frankly discuss or evidence their rationale for demolition or refurbishment, it may be time to reconsider the commission.

Participation through design

Fostering greater participation through the design process increases architects' opportunity to mediate between the claims of residents who want change, those resisting change and the needs of potential new neighbours. There are lessons to be learnt from community planning that has long aspired to shift the focus from consultation on preset development options to community participation, as a means of framing development decision-making and establishing a shared vision for regeneration.

A good first step would be to establish or revitalise a representative residents' group to inform and test the brief, design decision-making and development assumptions. Persuading clients of the value of evaluating regeneration options transparently with residents may begin to build trust and understanding around a shared project.

Perhaps project constraints make co-production proper unattainable. But committing to discuss options frankly with residents, address their concerns through design iterations and challenge ill-founded assumptions will demonstrate a willingness to recognise their lived-experience and perspectives as relevant, alongside professional expertise. Given architects' ability to interpret technical and qualitative information graphically, they are uniquely placed within the project team to act as facilitator able to interpret, interrogate and integrate the varied forms of evidence produced by residents into the design process.

Speculatively, future alternative forms of design practice such as community-based charrette or design review panels, consisting of local residents and professional experts, could enable residents and developers to positively challenge one another's assumptions. In this instance the architect can mediate power differentials between residents, professionals and developers, and facilitate a design process that harnesses both local lay expertise and professional expertise. How the architect might square duties to act for their developer-client with the role of community facilitator raises interesting ethical questions. Is there a supplementary role for a community-based design advisor during regeneration projects and how would it be funded?

Meaningful resident participation is already in evidence but it requires investment in training and capacity building. Neil Deely of Metropolitan Workshop says: 'Holding back information is counterproductive to building trust. It's far better for architects working on contentious regeneration projects to invest time with residents and clients, so that both understand the options, provide useful feedback and become a team. Given the right information residents will generally work collaboratively.'



Image 1/4: Metropolitan Workshop, with Pocket Regen, looks at how to offer residents clear choices, starting with original estate. © Metropolitan Workshop, 2016.

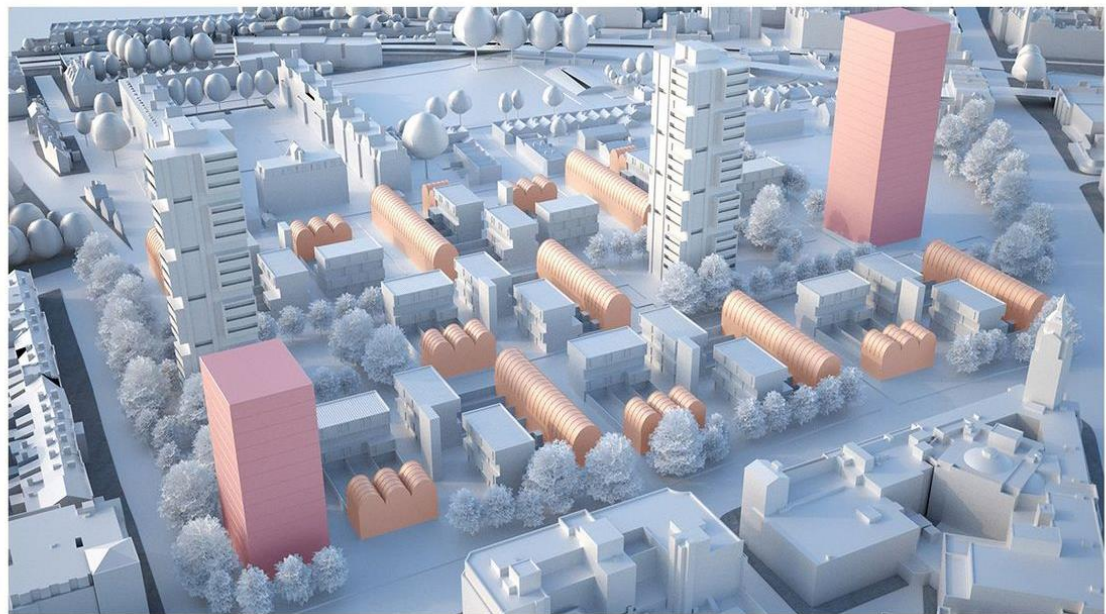


Image 2/4: Showing Pocket Regen minimum of 150 new homes.
© Metropolitan Workshop, 2016.



Image 3/4: Up to the 'silver' option of 225 new homes.
© Metropolitan Workshop, 2016.



Image 4/4: 'Gold': 250 new homes at density of 124 dwellings per hectare, up from 60 on the existing estate.
© Metropolitan Workshop, 2016.

Architects can empower residents to become well-informed partners, able to articulate preferences for their neighbourhood by explaining key development issues, eg how increasing density relates to project viability and maintenance. This proactive approach informs affordable homes developer Pocket's offer to directly involve residents in negotiations about the relative financial and social benefits to the community of accepting increased density from minimum to maximum intervention. As Michael Holland, head of regeneration strategy for Pocket, explains: 'We aim to add to the community, rather than just add unit numbers. Pocket believes that residents can act as a positive catalyst for estate regeneration, and will welcome it if they are given the opportunity to influence density and share in the respective upsides.' The developer's preference for achieving viability by combining repair and infill aims to reduce resident disruption and preserve social capital.

Using the design process to more transparently model commercial options connected to density and viability has the potential to engage residents with the needs of those outside the immediate neighbourhood to access a home. The need for commercial confidentiality within a competitive market may limit the degree of transparency. But a willingness to share more information has potential to shift the focus from opposing regeneration on the grounds it serves abstract market-demand and profit-generation, to honestly engaging residents with the ethical question: how many new neighbours could benefit from additional housing, and could my neighbourhood be improved through the regeneration process without significantly reducing my own quality of life?

Clearly, using the design process to support resident negotiations requires straightforward dialogue about contentious issues, acceptance that conflict may arise and commitment by the project team to manage it. For example, without evidencing the need to rehouse residents during construction, they are unlikely to accept disruption as temporary situation and begin planning positively for their return to the estate. The principle merit of engaging residents with the ongoing design process is that it demonstrates and frames legitimate project constraints, enabling residents to make the best possible personal decisions.

Open, design-led development processes linked to the resources necessary to realise change can achieve what resident resistance aimed at stalling regeneration cannot. It has potential to support sceptical residents to move on to negotiate a realistic settlement, avoids silencing residents in favour of change, and begins a process of investment that recognises the needs of those outside the immediate community. In particular, resident participation in modelling estate intervention in terms of design and financing offers the potential of avoiding adversarial resident-developer relations, while enabling residents to question the function of private investment and level of developer profit necessary to realise a regeneration process that supports long-term benefits for existing residents and new neighbours alike.

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Architect and planner Dhruv Sookhoo is visiting lecturer at Newcastle University. He has contributed to community-based estate regeneration projects in Dundee, Glasgow, Sheffield and London.

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